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What it's like to work for an American dictator in the making

Donald Trump saw strongman leaders like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping as an exclusive club, writes former senior US official Fiona Hill in a new memoir.

Gideon Rachman *Columnist*

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Many people who tried to work for [Donald Trump](#) were either discarded or bitterly disillusioned.

Few have given more eloquent testimony of what it felt like to work closely with the former US president than Fiona Hill, who served as senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council in the Trump White House from 2017 to 2019. Her memoir is a valuable

and riveting historic document. She left [the Trump administration](#) in no doubt that her erstwhile boss was an American dictator in the making.



Fiona Hill testifies during Trump's impeachment hearing in November, 2019. AP

Throughout the Trump presidency there was much speculation about his relationship with Vladimir Putin and whether the Russians “had something” on the US president. Hill favours a simpler explanation. Trump, she writes, suffered from “autocrat envy”. He was “fixated on authoritarians in general, not Putin in particular”.

According to Hill, Trump saw strongman leaders like Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and Xi Jinping of China as an exclusive club. “People like Putin, who was simultaneously an autocrat and reputedly super-rich, were an elite of their own. This was the group Trump wanted to see himself in – the internationally very rich, very powerful and very famous.”

This was not a mere matter of strongman chic. Trump “wanted to govern like them. He wanted raw power”.

Hill shot to prominence after [testifying in the Trump impeachment hearings](#) of October and November 2019. Her testimony revealed a compelling combination of integrity, intelligence and dry humour. For viewers in Britain, there was an added intriguing detail. Hill speaks with a

distinctive north-eastern accent. Who was this daughter of County Durham who had somehow made it to the inner sanctum of the White House?

Child of a coal miner

There Is Nothing For You Here answers that question. It is a memoir that mixes the personal and the political – telling her story along with that of the Trump years and US-Russian relations. In other circumstances this might have been an awkward combination. But Hill's personal, professional and political lives form a coherent whole so that each part illuminates the other.

She is the child of a British coal miner, who “having lost his job ... lost his sense of self-esteem, belonging and wellbeing”. Hill's origins mean that she intuitively understands the discontents caused by deindustrialisation in Britain, the US and Russia. She believes that the core support for Putin, Trump and Brexit came from similar constituencies, with similar grievances – “older, more male, less educated than others”.

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Hill's memoir makes for sobering reading. Without self-pity, she makes it very clear that her background imposed huge disadvantages on her. As a child she was offered a scholarship to a private school but was unable to take it up because her family could not afford the school uniform or the books.

At an Oxford admissions interview and then, on occasions, as a student at St Andrews university, she was treated with hostility and contempt by some of the other students – although it is a crumb of comfort that the actual faculty seem to have been helpful and considerate.

It was not until Hill got to the US, courtesy of a graduate scholarship to Harvard, that her talents were fully recognised and her distinctive accent was no longer a hindrance. After a doctorate in history, she built a reputation as a leading expert on Russia in academia and Washington think tanks.

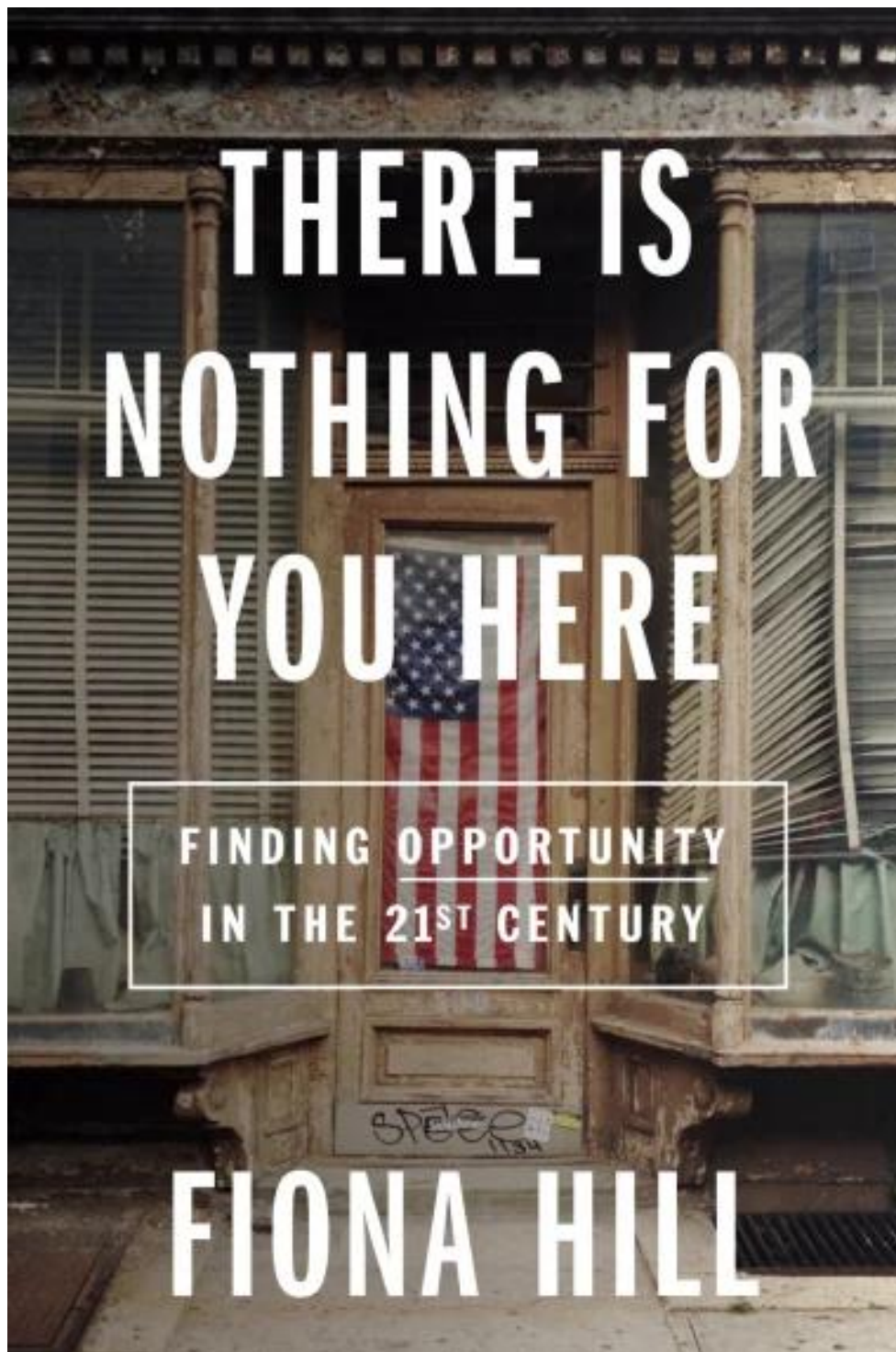


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Hill's experience in the US turned her into an American patriot. But she does not default to the American slogan that her life story proves that, if you follow your dreams, you can be “whatever you want to be”.

There is a touch of English realism and self-deprecation in her verdict that her success was actually a “fluke”. The last part of her book is a passionate argument for the removal of the structural disadvantages that hold back the poor in Britain and the US.



Fiona Hill's memoir "There Is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century" is being released next week.

When I finished *There Is Nothing For You Here*, I was left with one remaining mystery. Why did she do it? Many of Hill's friends in Washington would have warned her against working for Trump. Was it naivete, ambition, a sense of duty or, despite everything, a certain ideological affinity with Trump?

On this, Hill is frustratingly taciturn. She clearly got on well with her direct bosses at the White House, John Bolton and H.R. McMaster, who headed the National Security Council.

But she was originally recruited to the NSC when it was run by Michael Flynn, a former general and Trump loyalist, who was swiftly forced out of office and has now become a rabid conspiracy theorist. Hill notes the part that Flynn played in her recruitment but makes no further comment. Was there truly nothing about him that set off alarm bells?

Whatever her reasons for working in the Trump White House, I am grateful she did. The result is a memoir that will give pleasure to readers today – and will be an important document for historians of the future.


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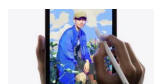
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